

THE PRECISE MEANING OF *PRETE* \*  
IN KATĦA UPANIᑖAD I.I.20

I

Kaṭha Upaniᑖad I.I.20 deals with the third boon Naciketas asks of god Yama. The circumstances leading to it may first be briefly narrated: « An old man Vājaśravasa by name, well versed in the Vedas, performed a sacrifice, desiring heaven. In accordance with the rules governing the sacrifice, he had to give away as gifts all his possessions. But owing to his attachment to property, which is hard to get over, Vājaśravasa gave away old decrepit cows which would only be a burden to those who received them. Naciketas, Vājaśravasa's son, was watching all this with faith. He thought that a defectively performed sacrifice would not be to the benefit of his father; and so he went up to his sire and asked him, "To whom wilt thou give me?". At first the old man did not heed his boy's words. But when Naciketas persisted, he got angry and said, "Unto Death do I give thee". And as the story goes, the lad Naciketas went to the land of Death in fulfilment of the angry words of his father », but did not receive proper hospitality during Yama's absence. When Yama returned he requested Naciketas to ask for three boons, to make amends for each night spent without hospitality. Naciketas asked for the appeasement of his father's anger as the first boon and the knowledge of the ritual by which one goes to heaven as the second. Then he asked for the third boon thus:

---

\* The word *prete* in Kaṭha Upaniᑖad I.I.20, wherein Naciketas puts his well-known question to Yama, has been usually understood as « upon dying » (Hume). Less often it has been understood as « upon becoming liberated » (Radhakrishnan). In this paper the precise nature of the question is clarified on the basis of criteria internal to the text and the conclusion is reached that the latter sense is to be preferred to the former.

This doubt that there is in regard to a man deceased: « He exists », say some; « He exists not », say others. This would I know, instructed by thee! Of the boons this is boon the third<sup>1</sup>.

The initial line of the verse cited above reads: *yeyam prete vicikitsā manuṣye*. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that the crucial word *prete* in this line has been largely misunderstood. It is further the purpose of this paper to determine its correct meaning.

## II

A review of the existing literature on the subject reveals that the word *prete* has been understood generally in the sense of « upon dying » and occasionally in the sense of « upon becoming liberated ». What is wrong with these translations?

The word *prete* has most often been taken to mean « upon dying »<sup>2</sup>, and it is easy to see why.

Yama is the lord of the dead<sup>3</sup> and what would be more appropriate than to question Death of death<sup>4</sup>? Moreover, does not Death itself say:

---

1. ROBERT ERNEST HUME, tr., *The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1921, p. 344.

2. Many scholars render the word *prete* as « upon dying » directly or indirectly; see Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman, eds., *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, part II, Calcutta, Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1946 (text first published in 1819), p. 27; EDWIN ARNOLD, *The Secret of Death (from the Sanskrit) with Some Collected Poems*, London, Trübner & Co., 1884, p. 18; F. MAX MÜLLER, tr., *The Upaniṣads*, part II, New York, Dover Publications, 1962 (first published 1884), p. 5; G. R. S. MEAD and JAGDISHA CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAYA, *The Upanishads*, vol. I, London, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896, p. 49; W. D. WHITNEY, *Translation of the Kaṭha-Upanishad*, Transaction of the American Philological Association, vol. XXI (1890), pp. 80, 96; ROBERT ERNEST HUME, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 344; RUDOLF OTTO, *Die Kaṭha-Upanishad*, Berlin, Alfred Töpelmann, 1936, p. 14; FRANKLIN EDGERTON, *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1965, p. 181; etc. Popular translations also take the word *prete* in the sense of death, see D. K. VISWANATHAN, *Isa-Kena-Katha Upanishads*, Rishikesh, The Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy, 1959, p. 202; SWAMI CHINMAYANANDA, *Discourses on Kathopanisad*, Madras, Chinmaya Publication Trust, 1967, p. 30; SWAMI ABHEDANANDA, *Mystery of Death*, Calcutta, Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1953, p. 22; CHAKRAVARTI RAJAGOPALACHARI, *Kaṭhōpniṣattu*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962, p. 18; SITANATH TATTVABHUSHAN, *The Ten Upanishads*, Calcutta, Brahmo Mission Press, 1925, p. 34; SWAMI NIKHILANANDA, *The Upanishads*, New York, Harper & Row, 1963, p. 70; SWAMI KRIYANANDA SARASWATI, tr., *Nine Principal Upanishads*, Monghyr, Bihar School of Yoga, 1975, p. 76; SWĀMĪ GAMBHĪRĀNANDA, tr., *Eight Upaniṣads*, Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1957, p. 119; SHREE PUROHIT SWAMI and W. B. YEATS, tr., *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1937, p. 27; T. M. P. MAHADEVAN, *Upaniṣads: The Selections from 108 Upaniṣads*, New Delhi, Arnold Heinemann Publishers India, 1975, p. 57; etc.

3. See A. A. MACDONELL, *The Vedic Mythology*, Delhi, Indological Book House, 1972 (first published 1897), pp. 171-74.

4. See EDWIN ARNOLD, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

O Naciketas, do not inquire about death (*maraṇam*) (I.1.25)<sup>5</sup>. The story of Naciketas is prefigured in the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (III.1.8) and therein the third boon has clearly to do with death (*punarmṛtyu*)<sup>6</sup>. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad contrasts the living, *jīvāḥ*, with the dead, *pretāḥ*<sup>7</sup>. And Śaṅkara himself glossed *prete* as *mṛte*<sup>8</sup>.

At first sight these arguments appear strong but tend to wilt under examination. Death may be the right person to talk about death, or immortality! And it is strange that Death should dodge questions about death (*maraṇam*). « It is, indeed, little less than absurd that the boy extorts from Death the disclosure of a ceremonial rite that renders one immortal in heaven, and then follows it up with an inquiry whether there is another world and another life. But yet worse than this, and the crowning weakness of the whole treatise, is that it after all reaches no definite result; the revelation of Death amounts to nothing at all, so far as concerns the main subject as to which knowledge is sought »<sup>9</sup>. The Naciketas story has clearly been reworked in its transition from the Brāhmaṇa to the Upaniṣad<sup>10</sup> and even in the Chāndogya itself the forms of *pra+i* are used not merely in the context of death but also of rebirth and salvation<sup>11</sup>. Finally, if Śaṅkara says *prete* means death, according to Madhva it can mean both « the "dead" as well as Mukta »<sup>12</sup>.

### III

The fact of the matter is that there are some very strong arguments for maintaining that *prete* should *not* be taken to mean « upon dying » here, in the sense of implying a question regarding survival after death of ordinary mortals. Consider the following points:

(1) There is a reference in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad (I.1.6), even *prior* to the departure of Naciketas to Yama's place, indicative of belief in rebirth: « Like grain a mortal ripens! Like grain he is born hither (*ā-jāyate*) again- »<sup>13</sup>. If it is already known that one survives death, for

5. See ROBERT ERNEST HUME, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 345.

6. See F. MAX MÜLLER, tr., *op. cit.*, p. XXII.

7. VIII.3.2.

8. See Lakṣmaṇa Śāstrī Joshi, ed., *Dharmakośaḥ*, vol. II, part III, Wai, Satara, Prājña Pāṭhaśālā Maṇḍala, 1949, p. 1395.

9. W. D. WHITNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

10. F. MAX MÜLLER, tr., *op. cit.*, pp. XXI-XXIII.

11. III.14.1; III.14.4.

12. B. D. BASU, ed., *The Sacred Book of the Hindus*, vol. I, Allahabad, Pāṇini Office, 1911, p. 69.

13. ROBERT ERNEST HUME, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 342. This line has been cited by T. M. P. Mahadevan in the course of his discussion of the doctrine of rebirth in Hinduism (*Outlines of Hinduism*, Bombay, Chetana Ltd., 1971, p. 62). Also see S. Radhakrishnan, ed., *The Principal Upaniṣads*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953, p. 603.

such survival is clearly implied by the doctrine of rebirth, what is the point in asking Yama whether one survives death or not?

(2) The very fact that Naciketas could go to Yama in the first instance is taken by Madhva as implying survival after death. Then why the question <sup>14</sup>?

(3) The first boon asked for by Naciketas involves his returning back to his father (I.1.11). Thus Naciketas, already freed from the grip of death, knows, after the first boon has been granted, that he will survive his encounter with Death, and thus knows that one can survive death. He is described as *mṛtyumukhāt pramuṅgam*: freed from the jaws of death. Then why should he concern himself with the question of whether one can survive death? The very fact that Naciketas could go to Yama is taken by Madhva as implying survival after death, that he would return to his father after doing so establishes this *a fortiori*.

(4) The second boon deals with going to heaven as a result of performing a ritual. Thus the second boon itself presupposes survival after death, for how else would one go to heaven? This argument has been anticipated by Rāmānuja <sup>15</sup>.

(5) Even before Naciketas asks for the second boon he professes belief in heaven (I.1.12-13) and is confirmed in this belief by Yama (I.1.18-19; also see I.2.10). Any questioning about post-mortem survival is thus again rendered gratuitous if not fatuous.

(6) Not only is the discussion of the second boon clearly predicated on post-mortem existence in heaven, belief in rebirth is also hinted at in I.1.17: *tarati janmamṛtyū* (« one crosses over birth and death ») <sup>16</sup>. Once again post-mortem survival is assumed.

(7) More generally, the world-view of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad clearly implies belief in the context of which any doubt (*vicikitsā*) regarding the fact whether man survives death makes very little sense. Thus the Kaṭha Upaniṣad clearly refers to belief in the (a) doctrine of *saṃsāra* (I.1.6; I.3.7; II.1.2; II.1.10-11) <sup>17</sup>; (b) the doctrine of *karma* (II.2.7); (c) the existence of *lokas* (I.1.3; I.1.18; I.2.17) and (d) in the existence of a state of salvation in which one is freed from rebirth (I.3.7; I.3.15).

Thus if Naciketas' question relates to the fact of whether one continues to exist after death or not then the answer is very clear and is

14. See ŚRĪŚA CHANDRA VIDYĀRĀṆYA, *Studies in the First Six Upaniṣads*, Allahabad, Pāṇini Office, 1919, pp. 119-23.

15. See GEORGE THIBEAUT, tr., *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Rāmānuja*, part II, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1976 (first published by Oxford University Press in 1904), p. 270.

16. ROBERT ERNEST HUME, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 344.

17. Franklin Edgerton (*op. cit.*, p. 30, fn. 1) has pointed out that the word *saṃsāra* itself first appears in Kaṭha Upaniṣad 3.7, though the idea is evidenced earlier.

to be given clearly in the affirmative. One survives. Why then, if such be the question of Naciketas, is it described as subtle (I.1.29: *gūḍha-manupraviṣṭaḥ*), should the answer be that obvious (see I.2.6)?

#### IV

The question would become subtle if the issue was not of the existence of the dead after death but of the nature of the existence of the liberated being after he has passed away<sup>18</sup>. It is well-known how problematical<sup>19</sup> the point was for early Buddhism<sup>20</sup>, wherein it belongs to the category of unanswered (*avyākata*)<sup>21</sup> questions<sup>22</sup>. Could it be that *prete* is not to be taken as *mṛte* or upon dying but as *mukte* or upon becoming liberated? The question put to Yama by Naciketas would now read: does the liberated being continue to exist or not after death? Now according to Rāmānuja this is precisely what Naciketas had in mind, as is clear from his gloss on Brahmasūtra I.2.12:

The full purport of Naciketas' question, therefore, is as follows: When a man qualified for Release has died and thus freed himself from all bondage, there arises a doubt as to his existence or non-existence, a doubt due to the disagreement of philosophers as to the true nature of Release; in order to clear up this doubt I wish to learn from the true nature of the state of Release<sup>23</sup>.

Madhva also supports this interpretation<sup>24</sup> and his suggestion is cited without comment by S. Radhakrishnan<sup>25</sup>.

But just as *prete* = *mṛte* created problems, so does the equation of *prete* with *mukte*. For it must be borne in mind that for both Rāmānuja

18. See R. Radhakrishnan, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 603-4.

19. See WILLIAM HOEY, tr., HERMANN OLDENBERG, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, Delhi, Indological Book House, 1971 (first published 1882), pp. 274-85; GUY RICHARD WELBON, *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and Its Western Interpreters*, University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 264-65; etc.

20. See T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, eds., *Dīgha Nikāya*, I, London, Pali Text Society, 1975 (first published 1890), pp. 187-88; also see T. W. Rhys Davids, tr., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, part I, London, Pali Text Society, 1973 (first published 1899), pp. 254-55.

21. See G. P. Malalasekera, ed., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. II, Government of Ceylon, 1966, pp. 464-66.

22. It is tempting to assume that part of the difficulty experienced by Buddhism on this count may be due to its doctrine of Anatta (*anātman*) and that Hinduism may fare better on account of its belief in Ātman. It is by no means certain that Buddhism was any worse off on that account (see WILLIAM HOEY, tr., *op. cit.*, pp. 281-83). And if the Kaṭha Upaniṣad is any indication, Hinduism does not seem to fare any better, if such indeed was Naciketas' question.

23. GEORGE THIBAUT, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 270.

24. Lakṣmaṇa Śāstrī Joshi, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 1395.

25. S. Radhakrishnan, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 603.

and Madhva salvation (*mukti*) is a post-mortem state<sup>26</sup>. Thus it is natural for them to assume that Naciketas' question relates to the state of the liberated being *after* its liberation-cum-death which are simultaneous. Is such an assumption regarding coincident death and salvation warranted by the Kaṭha Upaniṣad itself?

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad nowhere explicitly advances the doctrine that salvation is only achieved *after death* and not while alive. One verse, however, which could be taken as referring to post-mortem salvation occurs at the end of the famous metaphor in which the human psyche is compared to the chariot (I.3.3-9). The verse states that one who has discriminating knowledge as the charioteer (*viññānasārathiḥ*) and reins in the mind, « He reaches the end of his journey, That highest place of Viṣṇu »<sup>27</sup>. Viṣṇu's highest place (*viṣṇoḥ paramam padam*) can be understood spatially or metaphorically and if understood spatially would lend some support to the idea of post-mortem salvation, as one would naturally be taken as repairing to the place after death<sup>28</sup>. But there are other verses in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad which can be seen as referring to liberation while alive, two of these less ambiguously than one of them (II.2.1; II.3.4. and II.4.14). The first one contains the expression *vimuktaś ca vimucyate*: and liberated, he is liberated. This could either imply *jīvan-mukti* when translated as: « having become free (while still living) he becomes emancipated i.e. does not take up a body again »<sup>29</sup>. Or else it could imply *videhamukti* when translated as: « But when liberated (from the body), he is liberated indeed »<sup>30</sup>.

Verses II.3.4 and II.3.14, however, are more explicit. The second line of II.3.4 is somewhat controversial<sup>31</sup> but the first leaves one in little doubt: It speaks of realization prior (*prāk*) to the dissolution of the body (*śarīrasya visrasaḥ*). Moreover, the verse begins with the particle *iha*<sup>32</sup> in this context, i.e. right here; that is, right here in this world seems to be the clear sense, fortified by what follows. Similarly II.3.14 speaks of *brahman* being attained *here* (*atra*<sup>33</sup> *brahma samaśnute*). Two points emerge from the foregoing; first, that it cannot be asserted with absolute certainty or metaphysical finality that the Kaṭha Upaniṣad speaks *only* of post-mortem salvation and second, that therefore the equation of *prete* as *mukte* by Rāmānuja and Madhva, who make the soterio-

26. See S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1927, pp. 710, 748; SURENDRANATH DASGUPTA, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1952, vol. III, pp. 295-96; vol. IV, pp. 317-18.

27. ROBERT ERNEST HUME, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 352.

28. See J. GONDA, *Viṣṇuism and Sivaism: A Comparison*, University of London, The Athlone Press, 1970, p. 8.

29. SWĀMĪ GAMBHĪRĀNANDA, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 193.

30. ROBERT ERNEST HUME, tr., *op. cit.*, p. 356.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 359, fn. 1.

32. MONIER MONIER-WILLIAMS, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976 (first published 1899), pp. 169-70.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

logical assumption that salvation is a post-mortem state cannot be accepted uncritically.

But while the equation of *prete* either with *mṛte* or with *mukte* thus cannot be uncritically accepted, both seem to help in arriving at a satisfactory resolution of the problem: what is the true nature of the question put to Yama by Naciketas? There can be little doubt that the question involves death as Yama clearly refers to the question as dealing with *maraṇam* (I.1.25), a word less ambiguously referring to death than *prete*. However, if the death involved here is of an *ordinary* mortal then the question is a non-question for the Upaniṣad takes post-mortem survival of ordinary mortals for granted. The question does relate to death, but of a special kind of person, the liberated one. The *manuṣya* in *yeyam prete vicikitsā manuṣye* is a special type of person: one who has become liberated. One need not enter into the controversy here as to whether the liberation is pre- or post-mortem. *Whatever* the nature of liberation (about which the Upaniṣad leaves room for difference in interpretation) the question is related to the liberated one. In this way the two existing approaches converge. It is by integrating them that the correct nature of Naciketas' question is revealed. Naciketas' third boon consisted of an inquiry into the continued existence or otherwise of the liberated one after death<sup>34</sup>, as suggested by Radhakrishnan<sup>35</sup>.

---

34. In the light of this, the fact that Yama launches on a discussion of the nature of Ātman (I.2.18-25; I.3; II.1.12-15; etc.) and how salvation is to be achieved (I.2.10-17; etc.) in response to Naciketas' question becomes less puzzling if salvation is the context of his question. It is also instructive that Yama transfers the terms of Naciketas' question — *maraṇam* and *asti* — on to the discussion of the Ātman (II.2.6; II.3.12-13).

35. S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *op. cit.*, p. 603.